

MANN TRADES PRO BASKETBALL FOR PULPIT.

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The black sky above the Mississippi Delta is cracked open by a thunderstorm. Rain pours into the cotton fields and beats a rhythm on the roof of the small recreation building at Mississippi Valley State.

Inside, Marcus Mann is at work. The campus director of recreation, Mann is in charge of the building. Tonight he is staying late so the fraternities and sororities can practice their dances for the homecoming show. Dressed in black sweats and white high tops, the 6-foot-7 Mann looks ready for a game. But he rarely picks up a basketball these days.

On this same night, thousands of miles away, the Golden State Warriors are on the road, preparing for an exhibition game. Mann knows what it would be like. The team would be staying at a hotel. There would be groupies around, autograph seekers, flashy suits and jewelry, wads of bills pulled from money clips. Mann saw it all. Even in exhibition season, he saw the attention and riches available to men who can put a basketball through a hoop.

That's the life Mann, 23, walked out on one year ago Friday. Though he had beaten the odds, had become one of the millions of basketball-playing kids who actually made it through the narrow funnel into the tiny vessel of the NBA, he turned his back on a career in professional basketball.

"This is an unusual story," said his college coach, Lafayette Stribling. "But Marcus Mann is an unusual person."

And Mann has no regrets.

"I'm a much more mature and courageous man now," he says. "It's been a blessing every day."

On Oct. 5, Mann stood up before the congregation of Jones Chapel, the small Baptist church where he grew up singing gospel, in Carthage, Miss., and made the transition from God-fearing young man to preaching minister.

In the small towns of Mississippi, where gospel music and cotton-trading prices fill the radio dial, it is not unusual for a young man to get "the calling" to the ministry. Mann felt it last summer and

prayed. And when he opened his Bible to the book of Matthew and saw the passage - chapter 16, verse 26 - it was a moment of clarity.

"For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?"

Some thought Mann had gained the whole world when he was drafted in the second round by the Warriors in 1996. Despite a back injury in training camp, he was going to make the roster and be guaranteed the rookie minimum of \$220,000. He could become a star. At the very least, he could become wealthier than most people in Carthage or Itta Bena ever dreamed of being.

On Oct. 31, the day before the Warriors opened their 1996-97 season, Mann explained his feelings. He said it wouldn't be fair to him or the Warriors to continue. He said he wanted to work with children. And on Nov. 1, while the Warriors played the Clippers, Mann was on a plane headed back to Mississippi.

"I felt nervous, but at the same time I had a peace of mind," he says. "It felt so good to finally say, inside myself, 'Marcus, you are ready to do what you want to do.'"

For a long time, what Mann wanted to do was play basketball. He played in the yard of his grandparents' house, where he lived with his mother, Annie, and three younger brothers. He didn't know his father until he was in high school, but he had plenty of uncles and his mother with whom to play ball.

"It was the thing to do," he says.

He was an all-state player and highly recruited. After two years at junior college, he enrolled at Mississippi Valley State to play for Stribling, whom he had known most of his life. He was the top rebounder in Division I his senior season. He also maintained a 3.7 grade-point average, majoring in health.

"He's a serious-minded person," Stribling said. "If there was a party outside the dorm and every one of my players was there, I knew my best player was in bed getting rest. It makes coaching easier."

Stribling thought his star had a shot at an NBA career because of his work ethic.

Mann liked the Warriors, liked his teammates. He wasn't too homesick. He says his back injury didn't frustrate him. But as training camp extended through October, Mann felt himself changing.

"My desire to play ball was leaving," he says. "I knew I had an obligation to go to practice, but I didn't even want to. I knew God was making a transition. God was taking control of my life."

Mann struggled. He prayed every night. When he woke up in the morning, he faced the question: Should he stay and do what everyone expected him to do, or should he follow his heart?

He found a soul-food spot in Oakland and ate there every day, spending just a fraction of his per diem and saving the rest.

Then Mann left, trading an NBA job for uncertainty. He worked for a time as an assistant math teacher, then a bookstore manager. He enrolled in the master's program at Mississippi Valley and began to work as the recreation director, setting up programs for the faculty and students and community programs involving children. He wants to keep his salary private but acknowledges that it is less than 10 percent of the salary he was guaranteed as an NBA rookie. Significantly less.

That doesn't matter to Mann, who saved enough from his summer NBA pay to buy a computer and a truck.

Mann tells the kids who play ball in his building to pay attention to their schoolwork. He doesn't know what the future holds. He plans to get married next summer to a woman he met at church a few months back. He plans to let God guide him.

"God's people are a peculiar people," Mann says, smiling out into the Delta downpour.

Marcus Mann did not exchange his soul for profit. An unusual story, indeed.

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C.W. NEVIUS -- He Just Said No / Marcus Mann turned his back on big money in the NBA so he could find happiness working with troubled kids in Mississippi

C.W. NEVIUS

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IMAGINE THE moment. You're a kid from a small school in a little town in Mississippi. You've scrapped and battled in virtual obscurity until you finally attracted the attention of NBA scouts.

They give you a chance, an invitation to the prestigious Portsmouth, Mass., rookie workout camp, where, in the words of someone who was there, you "kick ass." A little undersized, but a fanatic rebounder, you can see the scouts nodding and putting little checks on their clipboards next to your name. An agent begins chatting you up, your new best friend.

Against all odds, it all works out. You are selected in the second round of the NBA draft by the Golden State Warriors. They fly you out, install you in a nice hotel and introduce you to Latrell Sprewell, Chris Mullin and Joe Smith, your new teammates. You play in a game against the Philadelphia 76ers before a crowd of 19,296.

You stand on the floor, wearing an NBA uniform, listening to the coaches tell you that with a little work, you could make the team.

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So you quit.

Marcus Mann walked away from it all some 10 months ago: a shot at the big time, an NBA career and guaranteed money. He "retired" and went back to Itta Bena, Miss., leaving a stunned group of agents, scouts and NBA insiders who can't believe that anyone would turn their backs on the dream of a lifetime.

"I tried to talk him out of it," says Warrior forward Ray Owes, who befriended Mann when he was here. "I told him, you don't know what you have here. I've been overseas (Owes played in Australia). You don't know how good this is."

"I mean, gosh," says Warrior director of scouting Ed Gregory, "how many chances do you get to make the NBA?"

But Mann was unmoved. He survived a telephone barrage from his agents, sermons from well-meaning teammates like Owes, and incredulous friends and neighbors in Mississippi.

"They've called me stupid," Mann says today. "They say, 'Man, you were just crazy stupid, giving up all that money.'"

Mann had a reason, which makes perfect sense to him. It is simple, direct and clear.

"I wasn't happy," he says.

Can you imagine? Happy? What's happy got to do with it?

Consider this: If he had simply stayed with the team, waited to see what would have happened, even if he'd gotten cut, he would have collected a guaranteed fee of \$50,000. And if he'd stuck with the team until January 10, he'd have picked up the NBA rookie minimum of \$220,000. Ask him about it today and he is not impressed.

"Never even thought about it," he says today. "Once I left California, all that was erased."

And wait until you hear what he's doing now. Mann is back at school at Mississippi Valley State, starting on his master's degree and working with troubled kids. Now I ask you, what kind of role model is that?

"It happens every day," Mann says. "It happened this morning. Guy walked up and said, 'So you're through with basketball now.' I said I was. He just kind of shook his head and said, 'I respect that,' but you could see he was thinking that I was crazy."

So this is what it has come to. Mann is the oddball because he wants to help kids and continue his education rather than sit at the end of an NBA bench and draw a six-figure paycheck. Somebody's confused here, but I don't think it is the kid from Mississippi.

When Mann left, there were whispers that he was too soft to play in the big time, but those who played with him and against him suggest that anyone who said that had not done their homework.

"The man is 6-foot-8 and 270-some-pounds," says college teammate and friend Derrick Carr, "he can't be afraid of too much. Once he gets mad, you see his eyes squint and his nose flare out, you just throw the ball in and watch the outcome."

"I consider myself a pretty good rebounder," says Owes, "but there were times when I had a hard time getting the ball. There were days when he was impressive."

Mann didn't do much in his first exhibition game with the Warriors, but he had three rebounds in each of his next two, playing 11 and 10 minutes, scored a total of eight points, blocked a shot and had a steal. In short, he looked like a guy who could make the NBA with a little effort.

And that was the problem.

"The desire had left me," Mann says. "I was dealing with it, thinking it was just a stage I was going through, but I just never could. I kept telling myself, you have played basketball all your life. Now you are at a point where you could make a living. And that's when the Lord asked me, 'Are you happy?' And I had to say I wasn't."

"He just didn't like it," says Owes. "The whole professional lifestyle: the traveling, the practice every day, no time to yourself. I could just tell he was real unhappy."

And that is how it happened that the guy who once brought the house down dunking over the Lakers' Cedric Ceballos during a summer game, ended up as an assistant math teacher at South Leake High School in Walnut Grove, Miss., when the Warriors broke training camp. The pay was \$25,000 a year.

When he left, then-coach Rick Adelman told Mann he was welcome to come back this year if he'd like, and CBA teams pestered Gregory to know if he was available. Even this year teams from Europe and the CBA are asking the Warriors if they could renounce their rights to him so they can try to sign him.

Here's a tip: Don't waste your time. When he was playing for Mississippi Valley State, Mann used to roam the team hotel, knocking on his teammates' doors. If he found a group of them playing cards or watching TV, he had a question for them: "Has everyone already studied their lesson today?"

"They didn't like it," say Valley State sports-information director Chuck Prophet, "but they went along with it because it was Marcus Mann."

"Once Marcus makes up his mind," says his buddy Carr, "he sticks with it."

So if you'd like to find him today, you might try calling the dean's office at Valley State, where he is coordinating youth programs, working on his masters and speaking to groups of kids. He says he can't remember the last time he played basketball in a gym and he doesn't miss it in the slightest.

"The Lord," he says, "had other plans for me."

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